New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

Volume XVII, Number 11 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 7, 1956

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 7, 1956*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Most Happy Fella"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
May 4, 1956

THEATER

'The Most Happy Fella'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE appealing little heroine of "Most Happy Fella" has two loves. So does composer-lyrist-librettist Frank Loesser.

Mr. Loesser loves the rich, rolling, exhilarating cadences that can spill out into an auditorium whenever a musical show approaches the freedom and the melodic fury of opera, or at least operetta. And at the same time he refuses to turn his back on the girl who has long since returned his passion, the impish and skipping and crackling straight musical comedy.

In his opulent adaptation of Sidney Howard's effective old play, "They Knew What They Wanted," Mr. Loesser has simply opened his treasure chest and hurled his bountiful prizes in both directions.

The riches are almost beyond counting. In the vein of semi-serious music there are sweeping hymns to the rolling California hills, ebullient explosions in honor of "Abbondanza," tender and touching little salutes to the beauty of passing autumn days. More than that. There is a roaring crescendo ("My Heart Is So Full of You") for baritone Robert Weede to sail at the balconies, and it is brilliantly sung. There is an odd, plaintive, gradually insinuating "Don't Cry" for Art Lund to wrap around the girl he is consoling—and unconsciously preparing to seduce. It is disturbingly right, in the writing and in the performance. And there are aching little comic laments for a wry, redheaded, lusty-throated lass named Susan Johnson: a marching rhythm for her weary feet, a prolonged howl of distaste for an interfering matron, a sorry "I Know How It Is" for any friend in trouble. (There are traces of Menotti in some of these, but no matter).

And on the other side of Mr. Loesser's fever-chart are all those tumbling, rollicking, heel-kicking outbursts that belong to the very best vaudeville. When a male chorus opens up on a shouting cannonade directed at Dallas ("Big D"), when a Dresden-china Jo Sullivan teaches her mail-order husband to observe the social amenities ("Pleased to Make Your Acquaintance"), or when Miss Johnson teams up with a beaming Shorty Long to announce "I Like Everybody," the clatter and the glitter and the irresistible drive of the music-hall are spectacularly honored.

The ambitious tunes swell mightily, and the torrid ones explode. Still, there's a little something wrong with "Most Happy Fella"—maybe more than a little. The evening at the Imperial is finally heavy with its own inventiveness, weighted down with the variety and fulsomeness of a genuinely creative appetite. It's as though Mr. Loesser had written two complete musicals—the operetta and the haymaker—on the same simple play and then crammed both into a single structure.

The overabundance is damaging. It tends to choke the movement of the action—in the second of three acts the show loses sight of its triangular romance while exuberant but incidental dressing takes over and gradually exhausts our emotional responses. Nearly every resident of this teeming California ranch is given his own definitive musical biography—sisters, cousins, even total strangers with suitcases—and the central tussle is attenuated almost to the point of indifference. Nearly every passing gesture has gusto, nearly every episode is independently stimulating. But a stimulus too often applied is at last powerless; there's a surplus on that farm and something should be plowed under.

Not Jo Mielziner's beautifully lighted sets. They're one and all wonderfully evocative, landscapes that shift hues with the seasons, railway silhouettes that establish for the play its precise dimension. And Joseph Anthony's stage direction is racy, glistening, and sensitive enough to turn sober when an orchestral chord calls for sobriety.

"THE MOST HAPPY FELLA"

Musical with book, music and lyrics by Frank Loesser; based on the comedy "They Knew What They Wanted" by Sidney Howard; staged by Joseph Anthony; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Motley; choreography by Dania Krupska; orchestrations by Don Walker; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden and Lynn Loesser at the Imperial Theatre, May 3, 1956. The cast:

The Cashier	Lee Cass
Cleo	Susan Johnson
Rosabella	Jo Sullivan
Tony	Robert Weede
Marie	Mona Paulee
Max	Louis Polacek
Herman	Shorty Long
Clem	Alan Gilbert
Jake	John Henson
Al	Roy Lazarus
Joe	Art Lund
Giuseppe	Arthur Rubin
Pasquale	Rico Froehlich
Ciccio	John Henson
The Doctor	Keith Kaldenberg
The Priest	Russel Goodwin
Tessie	Zinia Bethune
Gussie	Christopher Snell
Brakeman	Norris Greer
Bus Driver	Ralph Farnworth

Mr. Loesser's impressive talent is in such a provocative mood that I'd say any conscientious theatergoer ought to acquaint himself with the experiment at the Imperial. Speaking for myself, I keep wishing that Mr. Loesser had written six shows in the six years since "Guys and Dolls" instead of packing the energy of all six into one.

New York Post

May 4, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Arrival of 'The Most Happy Fella'

From the late Sidney Howard's drama, "They Knew What They Wanted," the enormously talented Frank Loesser has written and composed an ambitious new musical play called "The Most Happy Fella," which had its eagerly awaited opening at the Imperial Theater last night. Once again the sometimes unreliable out-of-town reports proved justified in their predictions of success. Mr. Loesser's latest work, with its more than 30 musical numbers and its frankly operatic overtones, has an impressive score, a sound dramatic book, excellent singing and acting, and a forthright style.

Furthermore, it has as its subject matter what seems to have become the favorite current folk legend of the American stage: the June and November romance, with the modest elderly suitor winning the beautiful girl from the arrogant masculine youth. The juveniles don't appear to have much chance of capturing the ingenues these days, now that, at least in the theater, the stalwart fellows with the paunches, the bald heads and the wistful maturity have come into their own. In "The Most Happy Fella," the tale is told with considerable dramatic and emotional effectiveness.

Reviewers of the new American school of the popular musical play talk a great deal about "integrated" scores, and this is certainly what Mr. Loesser's latest achievement possesses admirably. Most of the music, it seemed to me, suggests the more tuneful Italian operas, which is probably the proper style, since the story deals with the romance of an Italian-American farmer in California. But the composer has wisely added numbers which, without losing the mood, belong to his characteristic musical comedy manner, and these struck me as the most engaging of the evening.

There is, for instance, a duet between the middle-aged hero and the youthful heroine called "Happy to Make Your Acquaintance" that is particularly attractive. There are likewise songs known as "Young People" and "Standing on the Corner" and an especially gay and tuneful number about the joys of Dallas, excellently done by Susan Johnson and Shorty Long. Also, just to show that he isn't taking the Italian influence too seriously, the composer has given a trio of waiters a couple of songs in Italian that appeared to me admirable and amusing parodies.

In addition to the excellence of the score and the book, the show has several attractive and appropriate dance numbers staged by Dania Krupska, and the sets by Jo Mielziner and the costumes by Motley add properly to the mood. Altogether, "The Most Happy Fella" is a fine musical play and a notable example of Mr. Loesser's remarkable talent. Nevertheless, now that he has proved how well he can do with the operatic manner, I wish he would go back to what I can't help thinking of as his more successful American idiom. It is the songs written in that idiom that give the evening its most delightful occasions.

The cast has been wisely chosen. Robert Weede, an opera veteran, not only sings splendidly but has a sense of character as the Italian, although I didn't think he made the aging fellow especially touching. Jo Sullivan is just right for the part of the heroine, while the aforesaid Miss Johnson and Mr. Long handle the comedy relief most engagingly. Helping out ably are Art Lund as the handsome young man who hasn't a chance and Mona Paulee as the mean sister who tries to break up her brother's marriage to the ingenue. I'm sure "The Most Happy Fella" will have a justifiable success.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

May 4, 1956

'The Most Happy Fella' a Superb Musical Romance, Superbly Done

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In a fragment of song in "The Most Happy Fella" Jo Sullivan, the waitress, says of her middle-aged, mail-order husband that he makes her feel warm all over. There is no more felicitous description than this of Frank Loesser's beautiful musical, which opened last evening at the Imperial Theatre.

Much as Puccini and Charpentier sang lovingly of Paris, Loesser has sung of the Italian wine country in northern California. Taking for his libretto Sidney Howard's romantic play, "They Knew What They Wanted," he has fashioned a superb music-show, and it has been superbly produced by Kermit Bloomgarden and Mrs. Frank Loesser.

The composer-librettist of "The Most Happy Fella" shows no pretension of grandeur in his work; he isn't trying to write an opera in the heroic style. What he has sought to do is to make a musical play which will tell most of its story in song and recitative and yet stay within the popular idiom of the Broadway show. What he has accomplished is as distinguished as it is delightful.

Even More Lovely

The late Sidney Howard's play was about a lonesome Italian wine-grower who woos a young San Francisco hash-slinger by mail and brings her to the Napa Valley to become his bride. The rest of the story concerns a love which grows and deepens after the marriage—and a love which is almost tragically wrecked by a mistake on the part of the girl. It was a tender, lovely romance as Howard wrote it, and I think it is even more lovely as Loesser has woven his music into it.

There are few "set" songs in the Broadway sense. Instead of taking time out from the action, they are part of it. And there are some wonderful ones in an endless variety of style. Jaunty numbers like "Standing on the Corner," jubilant ones like "Abondanza," rollicking ones like "Big D," charming ones like "I Like Everybody and solid ones like "Like a Woman Loves a Man."

Best Possible Cast

Loesser's musical inventiveness seems without limit as he creates a robust baritone song, "Joey, Joey, Joey," several intricately patterned duets, trios, quartets and chorus numbers and even a piece of dirty gossip told only by a French horn. The orchestrations, by Don Walker, and the orchestra, led by Herbert Greene, have exceptional merit.

And the cast is just about the best big music-show cast in today's world. It can sing and act superbly, with Robert Weede, Miss Sullivan and Art Lund (a real find among big, handsome baritones) leading the company. It can be funny, with Susan Johnson and Shorty Long indulging in a comic romance. And it can dance its feet off under the direction of Dania Krupska.

Jo Mielziner has made a series of spacious, sunny settings for the production and there are fine costumes by Motley. Joseph Anthony has directed "The Most Happy Fella" skillfully and persuasively—and it may be that right now, still savoring my pleasures at the Imperial Theatre, I am the most happy fella.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

May 4, 1956

'Most Happy Fella' Hits Happy Note

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is an overwhelmingly inventive new musical at the Imperial called "The Most Happy Fella," a rich show drenched in song.

Frank Loesser has lyricized Sidney Howard's play, "They Knew What They Wanted" in what is the closest thing to opera Broadway has seen since Menotti and "Street Scene."

This one smacks more of Times Square than they did. Yet it has so much music, so much going on, that you feel Verdi must have rewritten "Oklahoma."

Plot Outlined.

It is the story of a middle-aged Italian grape farmer in the Napa Valley. He cheats his mail order bride by sending her a photo of his strikingly young foreman.

The day she arrives, the older man is seriously injured in an accident. The girl marries him, partly from shock and partly from pride. Almost at once she has a fling with the foreman, and it is their baby which threatens what has, months later, become a deeply happy match.

Mr. Loesser is most happy in his cast, particularly with Robert Weede, an uncommonly fine actor as well as the possessor of an extravagant voice.

Playing the old deceiver in uncompromising manner, Weede makes for most of the moving moments in an evening which is not as touching as one would expect.

Opposite him is Jo Sullivan, another excellent voice, and a loyal, honest actress. Miss Sullivan's beauty is fatal. She is exquisite, and, try as one might, it is impossible to accept her as a dejected waitress leaping at the protection of a man old enough to be her father.

I don't know how you ask such a blonde to stop being so beautiful, but someone should, for the good of "Most Happy Fella."

Art Lund is a fine choice for the young menace, blond, lanky, clear-featured, with slightly sinister slit eyes. He makes a memorable thing of the song "Joey."

'Big D.'

Susan Johnson is a wonderfully honest performer, and uses her powerful voice musically for such numbers as "Big D."

There are some particularly fine sweeping sets by Jo Mielziner, and some wild rural dances by Dania Krupska.

But finally, as originally, it is Frank Loesser's night. It is the music that is the flood and tide of "Most Happy Fella."

Mr. Loesser can concoct an impertinent comic number like nobody in the business. "Where's Charley?" and "Guys and Dolls" long ago proved that. Songs here like "Standing on the Corner" and the title number, and "Abbondanza" and "Sposalizio" are fresh and rousing, and make you feel like singing and dancing as much as the people do up on the stage.

The solemn passages are something else again. The composer has been bound by no convention. He does a dialogue where spoken lines are the alternate replies to lines sung. He lets a line of speech gather momentum until it turns into song. He suddenly interrupts a flood of music, for tremendous suspense.

Such use of song for high emotion does not last till the end. Finally, we get Amy's climactic confession in flat speech, contradicting the hot-tempered previous use of music. And, the final reconciliation is established negatively offstage.

There is so much singing in the show, before these top moments, that one is beaten by it. And it is all so loud that the eardrums feel assailed. Even the gentle background, "Summer Night," sounds bellowed.

Overly Tricky.

The Loesser invention is not so ripe for drama as for comedy. The big duet, "My Heart Is So Full" echoes Romberg and Novello. "Beautiful the Days" is overly tricky.

"Most Happy Fella" suffers from tension, volume and a refusal to let anything happen simply. Its novelty entertains, but then exhausts. It should relax, slow down and whisper on occasion—because it has so much that is charming and powerful in it.

Daily Mirror
May 4, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Most Happy Fella' Is a Masterpiece

• Loesser has performed a truly magnificent achievement with an aging play.

Frank Loesser has taken an aging play, and turned it into a timeless musical. From Sidney Howard's "They Knew What They Wanted," he has fashioned "The Most Happy Fella"—a work of almost operatic stature. A work that will be revived again and again, for it is a masterpiece of our era.

"The Most Happy Fella" is reminiscent of what the Italians call "verismo." That is, opera that is vital and violent. Emotional dynamite like "Cavalleria" or "Pagliacci." A slice of life, set to tempestuous and eloquent music.

But don't let this comparison scare you away from the Imperial Theatre.

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FOR, WITH RARE magic, Loesser has blended comedy and feeling. In re-telling the story of the lonely, middle-aged Italian ranch owner who eventually finds happiness with a lonely, young waitress from a San Francisco cafe, he has used few lines of spoken dialogue. Rather, after the manner of the Opera Comique, he has resorted to brief transitions to connect the flow of melody.

The result is a musical that moves swiftly to its inevitable conclusion. His people sing their thoughts, their joys and heartbreaks, instead of talking about them. Sing them superbly, through one of the most gorgeous scores we have ever heard on a stage.

Producers Kermit Bloomgarden and Lynn Loesser have found just the right people to do justice to the triumphant song-and- dancer. They can act and sing with the best. Robert Weede is tremendously moving as the the elderly grape-grower, who finds that he has been betrayed by his bride on their wedding night, but still grasps for the felicity that can be his.

Jo Sullivan plucks at your heart strings as the waitress seeking security, and tricked by a well-meaning suitor, only to forgive and fall in love with him. Art Lund is excellent as the footloose ranch foreman with an eye for the gals. Shorty Long, Mona Paulee, Arthur Rubin, Rico Froehlich, John Henson and Keith Kaldenberg are other outstanding personalities in the fine company.

• • •

BUT IT IS Susan Johnson, as a knowing hash slinger, who proves the surprise of the evening. Her wonderful sense of comedy stopped the proceedings frequently.

Don Walker has orchestrated Loesser's score brilliantly. Joseph Anthony's direction is highly effective, while Dania Krupska's choreography is buoyant and graceful. The settings by Jo Mielziner and costumes by Motley are off their top shelves.

Journal-American
May 4, 1956

This Musical Is GREAT

Loesser's Solo Effort Should Last as One of Decade's Biggest

By JOHN McCLAIN

FRANK LOESSER, who has written the book, music and lyrics for "The Most Happy Fella," which opened at the Imperial last night, has been credited elsewhere with having turned out a new American folk operetta, and there are others who insist he has created a musical-drama form all his own.

I think all this is nonsense. This brilliant and ambitious solo effort is, in my manual, merely a great, great musical by a guy who likes to write a lot of music and would rather have the people sing the story than talk it.

Sure, there are operatic overtones—there are trios and quartets, there are many duets, and in the last act he uses to enormous effect a melodic soliloquy. But in the meantime there is a large assortment of pop numbers, a fair share of earthbound humor, and the all-around punch and polish of a good, old-time song and dancer.

For this would seem to be a true wish-fulfillment for the same Loesser who has written so much juke-fodder and such memorable scores as "Guys and Dolls".

It's as if he said, "Look, fellas, this one is for keeps." And it may be. Within my limited musical orbit I would say that some of the arias may be lasting, and I can say without any apology that many of the tunes that are almost thrown away in the score will drive us dizzy in the taverns of the town.

It is hard to make comparisons, for there hasn't been anything quite like it in my time, but it should certainly remain as one of the big shows with music of the decade.

He is, of course, on wonderfully firm ground in adapting his story from Sidney Howard's "They Knew What They Wanted." It is a simple and appealing tale of a waitress who finds herself pledged to a past-middle-aged Italian grape-grower.

The arrangement had been made by mail order, with a phony picture selling the deal, and when she confronts the actual groom her disappointment bounces her momentarily into the arms of the man whose picture sealed her fate. Then, of course, she falls in love with her husband.

Loesser tells the story almost entirely in tune. There are something like 35 numbers in the show and they run the gamut of the reminiscent derivatives of "Baby, It's Cold Outside" and "My Time of Day" to a whole technique of more profound but no lesser Loesser.

Among the offerings I would choose particularly are, "Somebody, Somewhere," "Standing on the Corner," "Joey, Joey, Joey," "Sposalizio" (a fine production piece), "Cold and Dead" (a stop action idea, quite unique), "Happy to Make Your Acquaintance," "Big D" ("D" being Dallas, and very funny), "How Beautiful the Days," "My Heart is so Full of You" and "Song of a Summer Night."

I've probably missed a few, but that's because the program doesn't include the usual listings.

There are no poor voices in this cast, almost everybody has had formal experience and they unlimber in the old tradition.

In the role of Tony, the happy fella, Robert Weede gives a tremendously engaging performance and makes liberal use of his Met-trained pipes; Jo Sullivan, as the waitress, is extremely decorative and petite, yet with enough vocal equipment to stay with the big boys; Art Lund, once a singer with Benny Goodman's band, is a startlingly able actor with voice to match.

All Lyric

Other telling contributions, some comedic, all lyric, are offered by Susan Johnson, Shorty Long, Mona Paulee, Arthur Rubin, Rico Froelich, John Henson, Keith Kaldenberg and Lee Cass.

Jo Mielziner has done a most effective job with a series of Napa Valley vineyards, some interiors and a railroad station. Motley's costumes are bright and bewitching and the dance direction of Dania Krupska is always festive.

Joseph Anthony, the overall director, appears to have pulled the pieces together, maintained the pace and guided the proceedings with unobtrusive authority.

"Most Happy Fella" is a great tribute to the talents of Frank Loesser. It should also be a stupendous success.

The New York Times

May 4, 1956

Theatre: Loesser's Fine Music Drama

'The Most Happy Fella' Opens at Imperial

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HAVING selected a fine theme, Frank Loesser has composed a fine music drama.

The theme comes from Sidney Howard's memorable "They Knew What They Wanted," produced in 1924. In Mr. Loesser's music version, it is called "The Most Happy Fella," which was put on at the Imperial last evening.

The term "music drama" is used here advisedly. After having written the scores for two wonderful musical comedies, "Where's Charley?" and "Guys and Dolls," Mr. Loesser has now come about as close to opera as the rules of Broadway permit. He has told everything of vital importance in terms of dramatic music. He has written about the longest score that Broadway has had since "Porgy and Bess." In its most serious moments "The Most Happy Fella" is a profoundly moving dramatic experience.

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Nothing could be much simpler than the original story—the legend of a mail-order bride in California about thirty years ago. The characters are simple. They consist of a middle-aged, unattractive, highly emotional Italian who owns a vineyard in Napa Valley, and of a tired, rather commonplace waitress who is looking for a way out. She accepts his proposal of marriage without knowing him. Shocked by the difference between what she sees and what she had expected, she has a wild, brief affair with a young man of her own age. By the time she finds herself genuinely in love with her husband, she knows that she is carrying the child of another man.

Since the characters are simple and genuine, since the episodes are commonplace, homely and fundamental, the story is extraordinarily touching. As a composer, Mr. Loesser has range and depth enough to give it an overwhelming musical statement. The fiery and passionate arias he has written for the husband and the wife manage to concentrate the emotions in simple, direct, powerful, musical sound, and give "The Most Happy Fella" great dramatic stature. Without severing his connections with Broadway, Mr. Loesser has given Broadway some musical magnificence.

•

The leading parts could hardly be better acted and sung. As Tony, the volatile, good-hearted husband, Robert Weede sings with skill and conviction in a superbly trained voice. As Rosabella, the shy, timid mail-order bride, Jo Sullivan also sings beautifully, and is likely to break the hearts of the audience as thoroughly as Tony's. Having sung Julie in "Carousel," which is an equivalent music drama, Miss Sullivan has just the right experience for her present role.

Although "The Most Happy Fella" is obviously a rare achievement for the theatre, this department has a few reservations about the work as a whole. Mr. Loesser and Joseph Anthony, the director, have tried to make the best of two worlds—the world of music drama, the world of Broadway entertainment. Here and there it seems to be overproduced and overacted; some of the sequences are too facile, too slick and overblown, in the Broadway style that always tries to top everything in town. It is as if Mr. Loesser did not altogether trust the rueful and lovely fable they borrowed from Sidney Howard.

Even when the story is not concerned with Tony and Rosabella, "The Most Happy Fella" is best when it is simplest. The spaghetti music sung exuberantly by Rico Froehlich, Arthur Rubin and John Henson; the drugstore-cowboy song sung by Shorty Long, Alan Gilbert, Mr. Henson and Roy Lazarus; the original ballad sung by Art Lund, and all the songs sung with good humor by Susan Johnson, are in the happiest vein of "The Most Happy Fella." Although Dania Krupska's choreography is interesting, it is one part of the play that to this department seems overdone, as if it were more concerned with conquering the audience than developing the theme. Although Jo Mielziner's scenery is imposing, it is crowded and heavy.

But in everything that is vital to the theme, the work is first-rate. For the pathetic story of the mail-order bride and the man who loves her is a piece of dramatic literature. Mr. Loesser has caught the anguish and the love in some exalting music. Broadway is used to heart. It is not accustomed to evocations of the soul.

"Wake Up, Darling"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 3, 1956

'Wake Up, Darling' Makes Its Bow

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Wake Up, Darling," at the Barrymore Theater, is an undistinguished play about young married people on the fringes of the theater.

An unfortunate percentage of its lines are tasteless in their attempts to be sly. It is a case where the audience is more likely to gag than the actors are.

The show is one of those affairs where people are constantly wrangling over misunderstandings which children could clear up in a split second.

Familiar Triangle.

A successful young advertising man insists on writing bad plays, while his wife tries to act. She is "discovered" by a 23-year-old Yale man, creator of a musical.

Granted that the references to the musical are supposed to be funny, it still sounds like a creation even worse in its own field than "Wake Up, Darling" is in its own.

The playwright proclaims his intentions toward the actress. He is apparently tolerated by the husband, because the wife so wants to become a star.

And so it goes on, through tiresome variations. The play's chief accomplishment is to suggest that salacious smart alecks will not necessarily succeed behind the footlights. In this case there is hope for future audiences that none of these characters will get anywhere around Times Square.

Well-Played Roles.

More to be pitied are a few of the performances. Barry Nelson plays the husband with indignant and positive charm, refusing to be bowed down by the unreasonable behavior he must enact.

Kay Medford has that best beloved role of good character actresses, the tough, good-hearted spinster who loves her bottle.

She lands her remarks with irresistible aplomb and growling punctuation that suggest bricks dropping in oil. She is responsible for nine-tenths of

"WAKE UP, DARLING"

Comedy by Alex Gottlieb; staged by Ezra Stone; setting and lighting by Ballou; costumes by Guy Kent; presented by Gordon W. Pollock in association with Lee Segall and Richard Cook at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, May 2, 1956. The cast:

Martha.....Kay Medford
Juliet.....Paula Trueman
Polly Emerson..Barbara Britton
Deerfield Prescott..Russell Nype
Don Emerson.....Barry Nelson
Gloria.....Grace Raynor
1st Policeman..Robert Downing
2nd Policeman..Richard B. Shull
Granville Prescott.....
Raymond Bramley
Penelope.....Ann Whiteside
Mrs. Johnson.....Jean Arley

"Wake Up, Darling"—*continued*

the evening's humor, and much of this credit must go to her style and delivery.

Barbara Britton is startlingly lovely, but her wide success in TV has an odd effect on her stage acting. She performs with radiant, omniverous enthusiasm which suggests any minute she will pick up a box of her sponsor's product and try to sell it to you. It is kind of frightening, from such a pretty girl.

Russell Nype plays the composer author. He has been misguided into adopting an armor of affectations, presumably to suggest a college student. His natural simplicity and charm would have much better served the character.

Paula Trueman makes a distinct contribution as a household maid of familiar manners, playing with professionalism and style.

New York Post

May 3, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Comedy Called 'Wake Up, Darling'

There are some amusing lines in "Wake Up, Darling," and others less bright that Kay Medford momentarily almost lures one into accepting as witty. Furthermore, it is agreeably acted by pleasant performers. Despite these advantages, however, Alex Gottlieb's new comedy, which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, is a curiously abortive striving after humor, in which the most determined efforts to achieve an air of gay festivity emerge as fruitless, aimless and almost entirely lacking in anything engaging or interesting.

"Wake Up, Darling" is additional melancholy evidence that the American stage is full of good farcical actors desperately in need of some good farces. Miss Medford, of course, is a comedienne of notable deftness. Barry Nelson and Russell Nype are skillful young leading men who know how to play light comedy, and Barbara Britton is a beautiful girl with an intelligent sense of humor. And Raymond Bramley and Paula Trueman are experienced veterans of the theater with an admirable gift for character comedy. It seems a shame to find them with no place to go.

Matter of Viewpoint

Mr. Gottlieb's play is likewise evidence that reasonably humorous dialogue isn't by itself enough to atone for a narrative that lacks point and premise. Even if it were far more consistently funny in its lines, I doubt if a play so lacking in genuine comic viewpoint, farcical inventiveness and the basic sort of plausibility that a farce demands as much as any other dramatic form could prove satisfying as entertainment. After every promising spurt of brightness, "Wake Up, Darling" has a luckless way of dropping back into its characteristic doldrums.

Possibly I should get down to a few of the plot details. Well, an ambitious young actress thinks she has acquired the leading role in a new musical comedy, and she invites the author to her apartment for a meal. He, a guileless youth, thinks he is headed toward a romantic conquest, and he's a little surprised to find that the girl's husband, an advertising man who also wants to be a playwright, is there, too. A number of other people turn up, including an alcoholic lady secretary, a comedy maid, and a flirtatious divorcée.

People Who Stay

All of these characters share a propensity for sticking around, once they have arrived, and their sole purpose seems to be to keep the plot going long enough for a full-length play. I suppose they shouldn't be expected to behave very sensibly, but it strikes me that they abuse the privilege of being fatuous. And they aren't even entertaining in their idiocy. Would you be at all interested to know that, in the end, the young actress convinces her husband she isn't having an affair with the interloping composer and the composer decides he's really in love with a girl from Vassar, who also drops into the apartment?

Miss Britton is the ambitious but faithful young actress, Mr. Nelson is the husband, Mr. Nype the musical comedy writer, Miss Medford the alcoholic secretary, and Miss Trueman the comedy maid. I must say all of them seem more intelligent than the characters they are playing, which I fear is the dimmest of compliments to pay them. Mr. Bramley adds some of the play's best moments by his brief appearance as a father who would like to believe his son has seduced somebody. "Wake Up, Darling" isn't very much fun.

Daily Mirror

May 3, 1956

Robert Coleman's ***THEATRE:***

'Wake Up, Darling' Lacks a Foundation

• It's a case of hilarious lines in search of a play.

Swell gags, swell cast, but, as William Saroyan said in "The Time of Your Life," "no foundation." You see, in "Wake Up, Darling," Alex Gottlieb has penned sparkling and immensely funny dialogue for a company of skillful and ingratiating players, but has forgotten to plant them in a credible comedy.

There's a plot, all right, but it's so scatter-brained as to defy belief. We know that no self-respecting, highly-paid perfume ad writer would let a silly kid from Yale step into his home, and make love to his beautiful wife. That is, when he's really in love with her himself.

IT ALL BEGINS when the slogan-coiner's stage-struck spouse returns from an audition for a musical about the Civil War, with the star role and the author. She'd only wanted a bit part, but "the poor man's Cole Porter" sees stardust in her eyes. As if having an Ivy League stripling pitching woo at your wife weren't enough, up pops the frau's roommate at boarding school to take over his half of the double bed and use up all the hot water every morning.

Had enough? If you want more, you'll have to visit the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and wade through all the wacky complications for yourself. We're still a bit dizzy from our exposure to the preem Wednesday evening. In no condition to remember all the farcical ins and outs, except we seem to recall that a baby was on the way by the final curtain's fall.

Director Ezra Stone has made the most of those swell gags and that swell cast. There's Barry Nelson, struggling heroically to convince you that he would stand by while a playboy playwright tried to wreck his home. There's Barbara Britton, spirited and an orb dazzler, as the not very bright little woman.

There's Russell Nype, with his trade-marked crew cut and specs, laboring valiantly to persuade you and himself that he's a wolf with an old school tie; Grace Raynor, as a glamorous interloper; and Paula Trueman, as a sardonically philosophical maid. There's also Raymond Bramley and Ann Whiteside, making the most of impossible assignments.

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BUT, BEST OF all, there's Kay Medford, up to her old scene-stealing tricks. As a perennially inebriated secretary, with a barstool in the local bistro named after her yet, she's nothing less than terrific. Given Gottlieb's wittiest lines, she cashes in on them like the holder of a ticket on the daily double at the track.

Producers Gordon W. Pollock, Lee Segall and Richard Cook have also given the new arrival the benefits of an attractive setting by Ballou and costumes by Guy Kent. Pollock and his wife have been missing for three weeks when their plane disappeared over Lake Erie.

But, dear students of the drama, it does take more than rib-splitting repartee, given a shimmer by adroit troupers, to provide a completely satisfying evening of theatre. So, the first-nighters laughed uproariously, blistered their palms in approval. We still contend a hit has to have a "foundation." This one, unfortunately, does not. It's a case of hilarious lines in search of a play.

The New York Times
May 3, 1956

Theatre: Seasonal Play

Silly Spell Opened by 'Wake Up, Darling'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN strict accordance with the calendar, "Wake Up, Darling," which was acted at the Ethel Barrymore last evening, has officially opened the silly season. Beginning with a silly idea, it pursues it with implacable resolution straight down through a facetious evening. Imagine "Anniversary Waltz" without the wit, good taste and originality, and there you have "Wake Up, Darling," except that the acting and direction are in a broader key.

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According to the biographical notes in the program, Alex Gottlieb, composer of this frolic, "has established himself as one of the leading comedy writers of four media: stage, screen, radio and television." Naturally, one asks one's self which of the media "Wake Up, Darling" represents. It's hard to say on short notice. But it's fair to point out that there is not much theatre in it.

It belongs to the bean bag school of script writing. One character tosses a joke to another. The second tosses it to the third. Eventually a joke gets tossed back to the first character, the length of time depending on the number of characters on the stage at any given moment. To tell the truth, there are not enough jokes to go round. But something gets tossed every time. The motion is continuous.

"Wake Up, Darling" is triangular. Polly Emerson, who wants to go on the stage, is married to Don Emerson, an advertising writer who writes plays in his spare moments. In time to make a terrific entrance, Polly gets the star part in a musical play written by Deerfield Prescott, who is the repressed type. Deerfield makes passes at Polly. Don takes umbrage. From that moment on, "Wake Up, Darling" is toss-catch-toss-catch until the final curtain. It's like warm-up practice in a ball park.

Although "Wake Up, Darling" has a pleasant setting by Ballou and is also lighted by electricity, the performance is not very sprightly. Ezra Stone's direction is as mechanical as Mr. Gottlieb's writing. As the resentful husband, Barry Nelson acts like a professional. He can move his hands as well as his lips, and give a line a comic flourish. When the bean-bag is tossed to him he can catch it lightly and toss it on to the next victim with grace. Good.

But Barbara Britton, as the wife, acts as monotonously as a starlet—blonde, of course; and Russell Nype gives a flat performance as the goatish playwright. As the household drunk Kay Medford, who is getting into a rut, croaks, groans and stares in a state of chronic depression at the other inmates. Give Paula Trueman a line as the comic relief servant girl and she can make something pertinent out of it.

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For two or three minutes, there is a befuddled brawl between two reckless civilians and two cops. Robert Downing, the theatre's most industrious private lexicographer, plays First Policeman with the aplomb of a practical librarian. (Mr. Downing is also down in the program as assistant to Mr. Stone, but we need not go into that.)

During this whirling scene "Wake Up, Darling" wakes up and promises livelier things. But no. The bean-bag comes into play again. The silly season is here. Loud sing cuckoo.

New York Herald Tribune
May 3, 1956

THEATER

'Wake Up, Darling'

By WALTER F. KERR

IF "WAKE UP DARLING" has a problem, it's that the stage is too full of people who want to stop and make jokes about the jokes they've just made.

Let's see if we can clarify. In the second act of the new farce at the Barrymore, a gawky young composer from Yale has taken up residence in the apartment of a struggling playwright—with the declared intention of seducing said playwright's wife. The composer is busy at the piano, running over a fine little parody of Southern tunes ("Li'l Ol' You and Li'l Ol' Me") provided for the occasion by Leo Robin and Jule Styne.

While the composer is jittering away at the piano, the playwright is trying to write. Slowly, but irresistibly, he begins to peck at the typewriter keys in his rival's rhythm, frantically trying to keep up with the beat.

It's a funny bit of business and it gets a very decent laugh. Then, instead of stepping aside and playing it cozy for a while, author Alex Gottlieb pushes his luck. The two men have to go back and take the joke apart, stabbing on about how one rhythm is better than another for the purpose, and so forth. In an effort to double his profits, Mr. Gottlieb dissects the gag, distributes it over a vast terrain, and dulls it.

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You catch him milking his pleasantries in other ways. He is a fortunate man to have Kay Medford, the comedienne with the slumped shoulders and the suicidal eyes, to enunciate his jests in magnificent despair. There's a moment in which Miss Medford is required to swear "May the ceiling fall on me if I take another drink," and glance nervously at the ceiling as she exits for the nearest bar. The girl sells it for all it's worth, plus interest. In the author's scheme of things, though, she isn't really through with the material. There's an offstage crash and, as you unfortunately expect, the door opens to display Miss Medford with a piece of the hallway ceiling in her hand. Mr. Gottlieb is a compulsive gambler who never will quit when he's ahead, and the law of averages just plain catches up with him.

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It's a shame, too, because there's a fair share of brightness about the evening. When Miss Medford mistakenly supposes a man has drawn a rifle on her because she's borrowed his unfinished drink, a zany domestic humor rears its head. When a trio gathered in deep concern over an ailing hothouse plant are suddenly and successfully compared to those "Macbeth" witches slavering over their cauldron, an attractively antic flair for visual comedy pops up. (All right, it's a little forced; but it's sleekly arrived at, and it works.)

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And the actors are altogether able. Miss Medford has been praised in these columns before; all earlier tributes may stand, in triplicate. The actress has only to hunch over a highball, let her mouth sag into the mournful lines of a neglected hound-dog, and mutter "Sex was wonderful in those days" to whip a left-field line into explosive laughter. Even when she doesn't get the punchline, she's wonderful; almost the best thing she does in a busy evening is to let her lip curl wistfully when some one beats her to a perfectly obvious remark.

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As the husband who must put up with an uninvited and thoroughly dishonorable house-guest, Barry Nelson squints owlishly, shudders spectacularly, and roars baby talk at his idiot wife most agreeably. Russell Nype, as the "poor man's Cole Porter," jogs around the lazy-modern living room at a lanky canter and with a sprightly resilience. Barbara Britton is exceedingly pretty as the wife with too many friends, and Paula Trueman, Raymond Bramley and Ann Whiteside are nice to have around.

If Mr. Gottlieb didn't have them all reaching so far, so fast and so often, I think they might have made it. There's a perfume in the show called "Easy Boy," and it has its message for the author.